1

On the Pathos of Truth
(1872)

Is fame really just the most delicious morsel of our self-love? It has, after all, attached itself to the most uncommon men, as an ambition, and in turn to their most uncommon moments. These are moments of sudden illumination in which man stretches out a commanding arm, as if creating a world, light shining forth and spreading out around him. He is then filled with the deeply gratifying certainty that what

enraptured and exalted him into the farthest regions, the height of this *one* sensation, can never be denied to posterity; in the eternal necessity of this rare illumination for all those to come man sees the necessity of his fame. Far into the future, mankind needs him, and just as that moment of illumination is the embodiment and epitome of his innermost essence, so, too, he believes himself, as the man of this moment, to be immortal, dismissing all others as dross, rot, vanity, brutishness, or pleonasm, leaving them to perish.

We view all disappearance and demise with discontent, often with astonishment, as if we experienced in it something at bottom impossible. We are disturbed when a tall tree breaks, and a crumbling mountain aggrieves us. Every New Year's Eve, we feel the mystery of the contradiction of being and becoming. What offends moral man above all, though, is that an instant of supreme universal perfection should

vanish without a trace, like a falling star, leaving nothing to posterity. His imperative reads instead: whatever *once* served more beautifully to propagate the concept "man" must continue to exist forever. That all the great moments form a chain; that, like mountain peaks, they unite mankind across the millennia; that the greatest things from a bygone age are also great for me; and that the prescient faith of the lust for fame will be fulfilled—that is the idea at the very foundation of *culture.*

The terrible struggle of culture is ignited by the demand that what is great should be eternal; for everything else that continues to live cries out, No! The customary, the small, the common fills every nook and cranny of the world like an oppressive atmosphere we are all condemned to breathe, smoldering around what is great; hindering, choking, suffocating, deadening, smothering, dimming, deluding, it throws itself onto the road the great must travel on the way to im-

mortality. The road goes through human brains! Through the brains of pitiful, short-lived creatures who, given over to their cramped needs, rise again and again to the same afflictions and, with great effort, manage to fend off ruin for a short time. They want to live, to live a bit—at any price. Who would discern among them that arduous torch race that only the great survive? And yet time and again some awaken who, seeing what is great, feel inspired, as if human life were a glorious thing, and as if the most beautiful fruit of this bitter plant were the assurance that someone once walked proudly and stoically through this existence, another with deep thoughts, a third with mercy, but all of them leaving behind a *single* lesson: that he who lives life most beautifully is he who does not hold it in great esteem. But while the common man regards this bit of existence with such morbid seriousness, those on their journey to immortality knew how to respond to it with an Olympian

laugh, or at least with sublime disdain; often they went to their graves with irony—for what did they have to bury?

The boldest knights among those addicted to glory, those who believe they will find their coat of arms hanging on a constellation, must be sought among the *philosophers.* They address their efforts not to a "public," to the agitation of the masses and the cheering applause of their contemporaries; it is in their nature to travel the road alone. Their talent is the rarest and, in a certain respect, the most unnatural in nature, shutting itself off from and hostile even to kindred talents. The wall of their self-sufficiency must be hard as diamond not to be shattered and destroyed, for everything is on the move against them, man and nature. Their journey to immortality is more arduous and impeded than any other, and yet no one can be as sure as the philosopher about reaching his goal, since he knows not where to stand, if not on the wings

of all ages; for a disregard of the present and the momentary is of the nature of philosophical contemplation. He has the truth; let the wheel of time roll where it will, it can never escape the truth.

It is important to realize that such men did indeed once live. One could never imagine as a mere idle possibility the pride of the wise Heraclitus,* who may serve as our example. For all striving for knowledge seems in itself unsatisfied and unsatisfying, which is why, without having learned it from history, one could hardly believe in such regal self-esteem, such boundless confidence in being the one lucky suitor of truth. Such men live in their own solar system; that is where one must look for them. Even a Pythagoras, an Empedocles treated himself with a superhuman esteem, indeed with an almost religious awe, though the bond of compassion, to-

* Greek Presocratic philosopher, active around 500 B.C.E.

gether with grand faith in the transmigration of souls and the unity of all living things, led them back again to other men, and to their salvation. Only in the most rugged mountain wasteland, however, can one get a chilling sense of the feeling of solitude that pervaded the recluse of the Ephesian temple of Artemis.* No overwhelming feeling of sympathetic excitement, no craving, no desire to help or to save emanates from him—he is like a shining planet without an atmosphere. His eye, fiery and turned inward, looks lifeless and cold from without, as if just for the sake of appearance. All around him, waves of delusion and distortion crash onto the fortress of his pride; he turns away in disgust. Yet even people with tender hearts shun such a tragic mask; in some remote sanctuary, amid the images of gods, in cold, magnificent archi-

* A native of the ancient Ionian city of Ephesus on the Greek-inhabited coast of Asia Minor, Heraclitus is said to have written a single book, which he deposited in the temple of Artemis.

tecture, such a figure might seem more intelligible. Among men, as a man, Heraclitus was an enigma; and when he was seen watching the games of shouting children, he was pondering what no mortal ever pondered on such an occasion: the game of the great cosmic child, Zeus, and the eternal sport of world destruction and world creation.* He had no need of men, not even for his knowledge; he cared not at all for what one could learn from them, nor what other sages before him were at pains to discover. "I searched out myself," he said, using a word that refers to the fathoming of an oracle: as if he and no one else were the true embodiment and achievement of the Delphic maxim "Know yourself."

What he heard in this oracle, however, he took to be immortal wisdom, eternally worthy

* "Lifetime [or eternity] is a child at play, moving pieces in a game. Kingship belongs to the child." Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 71.

of interpretation, in the same sense in which the prophetic utterances of the sibyl are immortal. It is sufficient for the most distant generations; may they interpret it simply as the saying of an oracle, just as he himself, like a Delphic god, "neither speaks nor conceals."* Although he pronounces it "without laughter, without ornaments and scented ointments" but rather "frothing at the mouth," it *must* resound thousands of years into the future.† For the world always needs truth, and so will always need Heraclitus, though he does not need it. What is fame to *him*! "Fame among constantly fleeting mortals!" as he scornfully exclaims.‡ That's something for singers and

* "The Lord [i.e., Apollo] whose oracle is in Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign." *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 42.

† "The Sibyl with raving mouth utters things mirthless and unadorned and unperfumed, and her voice carries through a thousand years because of the god who speaks through her." *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 45.

‡ "The best choose one thing in exchange for all, everflowing fame among mortals; but most men have sated themselves like

poets, and for those before him who were known as "wise" men—let them gulp down the most delicious morsels of their self-love; the stuff is too common for him. His fame matters to men, not to him; his self-love is the love of truth—and this very truth tells him that the immortality of man needs him, not that he needs the immortality of the man Heraclitus.

Truth! Rapturous delusion of a god! What does truth matter to human beings!

And what was the Heraclitean "truth"!

And where has it gone? A vanished dream, wiped from the faces of men, along with other dreams!— It was not the first!

Of all that we with such proud metaphors call "world history" and "truth" and "fame," a heartless demon might have nothing to say but this:

---

cattle." *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus,* 73. Contrary to Nietzsche's reading, the scorn in this fragment is aimed not at seekers of fame but at the bovine herd.

"In some remote corner of the sprawling universe, twinkling among the countless solar systems, there was once a star on which some clever animals invented *knowledge*. It was the most arrogant, most mendacious minute in world history, but it was only a minute. After nature caught its breath a little, the star froze, and the clever animals had to die. And it was time, too: for although they boasted of how much they had come to know, in the end they realized they had gotten it all wrong. They died and in dying cursed truth. Such was the species of doubting animal that had invented knowledge."

This would be man's fate were he nothing more than a thinking animal; truth would drive him to despair and annihilation, truth eternally damned to be untruth. All that is proper to man, however, is faith in the attainable truth, in the ever approaching, confidence-inspiring illusion. Does he not in fact live *by* constant deception? Doesn't nature conceal virtually

everything from him, even what is nearest, for example, his own body, of which he has only a spurious "consciousness"? He is locked up in this consciousness, and nature has thrown away the key. O fateful curiosity of the philosopher, who longs to peer out just once through a crack in the chamber of consciousness—perhaps then he gains an intimation that man rests in the indifference of his ignorance on the greedy, the insatiable, the disgusting, the merciless, the murderous, suspended in dreams on the back of a tiger.

"Let him hang," cries *art*. "Wake him up," cries the philosopher, in the pathos of truth. Yet, even as he believes himself to be shaking the sleeper, he himself sinks into a still deeper magical slumber—perhaps then he dreams of "ideas" or of immortality. Art is mightier than knowledge, for *it* wants life, and knowledge attains as its ultimate end only—annihilation.